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EASTERN WORLD

S.E.ASIA · FAR EAST · PACIFIC

LONDON JANUARY 1953
Volume VII Number 1

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6: Fisher U-3 (no date) 1953 ALI Southeast Asia ALI

000 THE CONCEPT OF SOUTH-EAST ASIA

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101 DURING the past decade the term "South-East Asia" has figured increasingly in the literature of international affairs but there is still a surprising lack of agreement over its exact meaning. Many writers apparently continue to use it as a synonym for the whole vast area stretching from Pakistan in the West to Manchuria and Japan in the north-east, which S. K. Datta once called 'Asiatic Asia' and geographers have more usually referred to as Monsoon Asia. The very existence of these alternatives is, however, an argument against using the term South-East Asia in this way and, in the writer's opinion, there are very strong grounds for restricting its meaning to cover simply the area lying to the east of India/Pakistan and to the south of China, i.e., Burma, Thailand, Indo-China, Malaya, British Borneo, Indonesia and the Philippines. For, clearly, this area, and this alone, seems entitled on purely geographical grounds to be regarded as South-East in relation to the rest of the continent and, more important, there is an obvious need for a collective term to embrace these seven lands which have so much in common with each other.

Lying as it does between the Indian sub-continent (South Asia) and the Sino-Japanese realm (East Asia) which together constitute the two great cultural and demographic foci of the continent as a whole, South-East Asia has always been in some degree overshadowed by these neighbours. In a sense, indeed, that very fact lends it a measure of unity, for its civilizations are essentially derivative and, indeed, colonial in origin, and the region as a whole may not unfairly be regarded as transitional, both in its physical and human characteristics, between India and China. If, ethnically, its peoples are in general more closely related to the Chinese, Indian strains are nevertheless present, while, conversely, except in Annam, the Chinese element in South-East Asian culture is far less evident than the Indian, though both are usually recognizable.

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101 Perhaps the outstanding feature of the human geography of South-East Asia throughout historic times has been the much lower density of population which it has supported, in comparison with the two neighbouring subcontinents already noted. In the main this must be attributed to the great difficulty of entry overland, through the mass of lofty jungle-covered plateau in the north, to the predominantly mountainous character of South-East Asia itself, and to the prevalence of tropical diseases which are endemic in such conditions. So far as available records can be trusted, the population of South-East Asia has never exceeded a third of that of either the Indian subcontinent or China proper, and today its average density of about 90 to the square mile compares with 275 for India, 285 for the former eighteen provinces of China, and over 500 for Japan.

This state of affairs, both past and present, taken in conjunction with the political fragmentation of South-East Asia which has been fostered by its physical division into a maze of islands and peninsulas, goes far to explain the extent to which it has fallen under the shadow of both India, China and, in more recent times, Japan. Thus during the early centuries of the Christian era, nearly the whole of South-East Asia, apart from Annam which formed part of Imperial China, came under the influence of southern Indian colonization. This has left as its memorials not only the glories of Angkor and other monuments, but also the Buddhist religion of the mainland and the surviving Hinduism of Bali and Lombok. Likewise from India, through the intermediary of Gujarati spice traders, came Islam which, after the 13th century, established itself in the greater part of Malaysia but achieved no lasting foothold in the Buddhist lands farther north.

In the meantime, however, commercial ties had been slowly developing between many parts of South-East Asia and the Chinese empire. At least from the 8th century A.D. onwards there are records of missions arriving in

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101 China from Java and elsewhere in the Nan Yang ('southern seas'), bringing with them specimens of their countries' produce. Although these were apparently intended to promote trading relationships between the lesser lands of South-East Asia and the great empire to the north—a design in which they were usually successful—the Chinese frequently chose to interpret such missions as evidence of submission and to regard the goods brought by the foreigners as tribute. Thus there grew up an established tributary relationship between many countries of South-East Asia and Imperial China. By an extension of the Confucian family code into foreign affairs the former lands came to be styled the younger brothers and China the elder brother and, notwithstanding the severance of these links by the European powers in modern times, this attitude is by no means forgotten even today.

Despite these very ancient links of both its great neighbours with South-East Asia, however, it was not until the area had begun to pass under European control that really extensive Chinese or Indian settlement took place within its borders. To be more precise, although the Dutch found many Chinese, as also a handful of Japanese, in Indonesia even in the early 17th century, it was not until the latter half of the 19th century, when the completion of the Suez Canal led to rapid economic development in South-East Asia, that Chinese began to pour into almost every part of the region. Meanwhile, and more especially in the present century, Indians, though on a smaller scale, have emigrated to those areas, notably Burma and Malaya, which were under British influence or control. Taken as a whole, this migration, which has provided South-East Asia with a population of over eight million Chinese and nearly two million Indians at the present day, must be regarded as second only to the great European exodus to the Americas during the same period. And, like it, the incentive was primarily economic. The relatively unoccupied pioneer lands in both cases provided far greater opportunities than the congested home-lands of the peoples in question. Just as the youth of Europe was advised to "go west," so to the Southern Chinese and Indians opportunity beckoned towards the south and east respectively.

The resultant plural societies, which are a feature of every country in South-East Asia, form yet another distinctive characteristic which marks out the latter as something different from either of its great neighbours. Yet the parcelling out of the region, with the solitary exception of Thailand, into a series of western-controlled dependencies, each subjected to different methods of administration in accordance with the particular colonial philosophy of the respective metropolitan power, served steadily to obscure the overall unity of South-East Asia as a whole. Indeed, it was not until the Japanese overran the entire region after 1941, thereby depriving the West of invaluable supplies of rubber, tin, and both vegetable and mineral oils, and creating a vast series of problems, many of which still defy solution, that the West first began to think in terms of South-East Asia as an entity.

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101 The primary problem at this juncture was, of course, to expel the Japanese from the area, and it was with this in mind that SEAC, which first publicised the new regional name, was established. Of necessity SEAC had initially to be based outside the region, since the latter lay entirely in enemy hands. Unfortunately, the habit has consequently grown up of regarding Ceylon and often, by association, both India and Pakistan as well, as integral parts of South-East Asia, and this has undoubtedly led to much confusion and muddled thinking. More recently, several writers have attempted to perpetuate this use of the term on the grounds that, under the aegis of the Colombo Plan, a new economic alignment is developing between South and South-East Asia. Thus, for example, Mr. Woodrow Wyatt* has stated that the formerly accepted definition of South-East Asia in its narrow sense is out of date since it is impossible to dissociate the countries to which it refers from India, Pakistan and Ceylon. While one may in large measure agree with many of his conclusions, this particular argument would appear to lead logically to such absurdities as including the United States in a definition of Western Europe or the Soviet Union as part of Eastern Germany.

The usage should, however, be criticised for more fundamental reasons than this. In the first place the problems of South Asia are by no means the same as those of South-East Asia. Thus, whereas in South Asia the outstanding problem is posed by over-population, only a few parts of South-East Asia are so affected and the region as a whole could undoubtedly support many more people without fundamental changes in techniques. Indeed, although its immediate preoccupation is with economic and political rehabilitation after the disruption and devastation of Japanese rule, which South Asia did not experience, South-East Asia may well in the near future come to regard the existence of so much relatively sparsely peopled land as its greatest source of weakness. Already since 1945 the Japanese have again several times raised the matter of emigration to such under-developed lands as eastern Indonesia and, with mounting population pressure in India, Pakistan and China also, it is by no means impossible that Japan's lead may later be followed by others of South-East Asia's neighbours.

This, in turn, leads to a further criticism of the extended use of the terms South-East Asia to embrace South Asia as well. Granted that the ties between India, Pakistan and Ceylon on the one hand and South-East Asia on the other are both strong and of deep historical significance, it still remains an open question whether they will prove tougher and more permanent than those which bind the latter to East Asia.

In the days before the war, when the modern concept of South-East Asia had not won general acceptance, two alternative names for the area were sometimes used, *viz.* Further India and the Far Eastern Tropics. Both of these terms enshrine important elements of truth, and both implicitly suggest that South-East Asia, on account of its

* *Southwards from China*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1952.

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101 inherent weakness, must be thought of in relation to one or other of its Asian neighbours.

Such is clearly the case today. The ties binding South-East Asia to India (and to a lesser extent to Pakistan) are based largely on personal respect for India's leaders and a common experience of breaking free from political dependence on the West. In this respect India is, in effect, the elder brother to the newly-independent States of South-East Asia and has effectively championed their cause both at the United Nations and elsewhere. Thus India has taken over the rôle which was formerly, though hardly disinterestedly, played by Japan as champion of "Asia for the Asiatics"* until the experiences of 1942-5 revealed her true intentions.

Certainly today there is far less affection in South East Asia for Japan than for India, but, thanks to the rapacity of many Chinese middlemen, local feeling towards China is even more hostile throughout the region. Thus, on grounds of sentiment alone, the alignment of South-East with South Asia appears to be eminently secure.

Unfortunately, however, this is by no means the whole story and two other factors weigh heavily on the opposite side of the balance. Economically speaking, the interdependence of temperate and tropical lands, at least in the present stage of Asian development, affords a firmer basis for trade between South-East and East Asia than anything existing in the relationship between the former

* The term "Asians" had not then come into general use.

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101 and India. This interdependence, which has in some degree underlain the economic geography of the Far East from the days of the early tribute-bearing missions to the time of Japan's short-lived Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, is likely to be exploited still further in future. Certainly, so long as Japan is cut off from trade with China she has no option but to pursue such a course, and it is by no means unlikely that China herself, once industrialized, will follow a similar policy. And, if such should indeed prove to be the case, the presence of a vast Chinese commercial community scattered throughout South-East Asia would be a formidable asset, quite apart from its even greater potential significance should an attempt ever be made to create by force a new Co-prosperity Sphere under Chinese auspices.

In short, the conclusion seems inescapable that the alignment between South and South-East Asia, desirable though it undoubtedly is from the standpoint of all free men, is by no means assured for the years that lie ahead. On the contrary, the possibility of new association with East Asia, with all the formidable consequences which that implies, cannot be ruled out. Indeed the dominant theme in the oriental history of the second half of the 20th century may well be the struggle of both South and East Asia for paramount influence in the area which lies between them. Greater East Asia we have known in our lifetime; it remains to be seen whether Greater South Asia can capture the minds and energies of men sufficiently to prevent a further relapse into barbarism and exploitation.

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